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SUBJECT: TAJIKISTAN: UNTOP AND OSCE SPONSOR FIRST PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION-YEAR DIPLOMATIC ROUNDTABLE

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¶1. (U) Sensitive but unclassified. Please handle accordingly.
Not for public Internet.

¶2. (SBU) The UN Secretary General's Special Representative for the Tajikistan Office for Peace Building (UNTOP), Ambassador Vladimir Sotirov (secunded to the UN from the Bulgarian Foreign Ministry), conducted on April 19 the first ambassadorial-level roundtable of this presidential election year. OSCE co-sponsored the event. The U.S. Chief of Mission was the only Ambassador present other than Sotirov. Other missions, including OSCE, sent deputies or lower-level officers.

¶3. (U) Ambassador Sotirov, a highly skilled international diplomat with enormous experience and broad contacts and personal respect in Tajikistan's political world, gave an in-depth briefing. Although it's not yet announced, he said Government of Tajikistan officials have confirmed to him November 6 will be the date for the presidential election. The chairman of the Central Committee for Elections and Referenda (CCER) told Sotirov he expects two to three presidential candidates will be nominated in addition to Rahmonov.

¶4. (U) While election activity has not formally commenced, and while the political atmosphere is relatively calm and stable, it is clear this is an election year, Sotirov said. Political parties are gearing up their activities, splits in the small "democratic" parties have emerged (whether instigated by ruling-party dirty tricks or simply by egoism is unclear), and lively, even acrimonious, debate is taking place in independent

media like "Asia-Plus," "Biznis i Politika," and party newspapers. Every party has established a web site. Although these media debates do not reach the majority of the electorate, surprisingly free-wheeling political discourse is taking place in public.

¶15. (U) According to Sotirov, significant parts of the Tajik citizenry do not view a multi-party system positively. The word "opposition" evokes for them memories of the 1992-97 civil war, and they would be more comfortable with a one-party state, so long as it is politically benign, economically progressive, and socially protective. He added that competition among the parties is more about struggling for power than ideology.

¶16. (SBU) Sotirov provided the following analysis of the parties:

-- The ruling Peoples Democratic Party of Tajikistan feels comfortable in power and confident of its re-election. That said, President Rahmonov is holding high-profile town meetings with special interest groups, like women, youth, and the intelligentsia, where he makes a real effort to listen to their concerns.

-- The Islamic Renaissance Party of Tajikistan (IRPT) has two increasingly competing factions: the pro-Western modernizers and the old-guard Islamists. This is the party the government fears most, and will likely pull out all the dirty-trick stops to hobble it - e.g., the current Dushanbe Water Authority's libel case against IRPT Chairman Nuri, who in any case is an absentee leader because of his serious health problems.

-- The Social Democratic Party of Tajikistan (SDPT) is likely to nominate its chairman, former presidential adviser Zoirov, as a presidential candidate. His role, however, will be largely rhetorical, arguing stridently and pedantically that President Rahmonov is already constitutionally illegitimate. Because Zoirov is at least half ethnically Uzbek, there is considerable

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doubt whether he could ever be taken seriously by the population at large, apart from his judicial-intelligentsia, big-city base.

-- With Democratic Party of Tajikistan (DPT) Chairman Mahmadrizi Iskandarov imprisoned, the party is focusing on issues like labor migration and energy security.

-- The minuscule and insignificant Socialist Party of Tajikistan (SPT) has broken into two wings, with the Gaffurov Wing already announcing it will support President Rahmonov.

-- The Communist Party of Tajikistan (CPT), surprisingly, is currently consumed with a struggle for leadership between the traditional Soviet and the modernizers' wings.

-- The Agrarian Party and the Party of Economic Reforms, new to the scene, are generally considered to be government-created "pocket parties" that may nominate candidates, especially if the more formal "opposition" parties decide to boycott the election, so that Rahmonov can say that he conducted a multi-party, multi-candidate election.

¶17. (SBU) Sotirov noted Article 65 of the Constitution requires a presidential candidate to collect signatures from five percent of the electorate, or about 150,000. Article 24 of the Law on Presidential Elections requires that local government offices (hokimats) need to "certify" each signature. CCER Chairman Boltuyev told Sotirov he will not be overly strict about these requirements, and commented he personally believes five percent is too high, but the Constitution can only be changed by a referendum, and there is no time for that before this election.

¶18. (SBU) The CCER has made a commitment to conduct the best election in Tajikistan's short history. To that end, it is working closely with UNTOP and especially with the International Foundation for Election Systems (IFES) to identify criticisms from the past and its responsibilities under Tajik law and

international obligations, including to OSCE and CIS convention standards.

¶19. (SBU) Sotirov asked IFES Director Katherine Muller to brief the roundtable on the status of her work with the CCER. She distributed the IFES election project proposal, and the matrix (with which the government has already concurred) identifying specific areas for improvement in the conduct of the election. The Ambassador said the State Department is strongly impressed with the current work of IFES and its election project proposal, will provide significant, but not complete, financial support to implement it. He strongly urged other missions dedicated to advancing democracy to consider significant financial contributions to the project.

¶10. (SBU) The OSCE representative present noted that ODIHR will provide commentary by June on the current Presidential Election Law (which is separate from the Parliamentary Election Law that was partially revised in 2004 for the February 2005 election), and is considering sending an OSCE Needs Assessment Mission to Tajikistan the first week of June.

¶11. (SBU) Sotirov announced that Foreign Minister Talbak Nazarov has officially requested a UN Election Needs Assessment, and that the date will soon be fixed.

¶12. (SBU) The next UNTOP and OSCE presidential election roundtable has not been scheduled but will most likely coincide with OSCE or UN Needs Assessment Mission and may include the

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chairman or other senior member of the CCER.

¶13. (SBU) COMMENT: We have noticed an increasing tendency for the European Union's bilateral Missions - the United Kingdom, France, and Germany - to work in lockstep, which hampers U.S. coalition building, since the EU too often chooses a lowest-common-denominator position too late in the game to have real influence. The U.S. Embassy has already taken the lead to advance transformational democracy with this presidential election, and will continue to work closely with UNTOP's Ambassador Sotirov. END COMMENT.

HOAGLAND